

# 'The Poet from the Periphery': Derek Walcott, Prestige and Literary Centrality

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## **“The poet from the periphery”: Derek Walcott, prestige and literary centrality**

Author: Dorothy Butchard

In 1985, seven years before Derek Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Sven Birkerts hailed the Caribbean poet as a prodigious talent. Expressing admiration for his literary ‘craftsmanship’, Birkerts concluded a review of Walcott’s work by suggesting that this poet’s evident ability might prompt a reconfiguration of assumptions about dominant literary realms. “He is the outsider”, Birkerts asserts, ‘the poet from the periphery, but it may be time to centre the compass at his position and draw the circle again’.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the review, Birkerts uses tropes of ‘periphery’ and ‘centre’ to clarify his opinion of Walcott’s capacity to ‘redraw’ conventional Western assumptions about literary boundaries. However, although he proposes a radical re-centring of the literary ‘compass’ in order to position Walcott as the focal point of a prestigious ‘circle’ of literary excellence, Birkerts’s comments do not challenge the idea of a literary sphere divisible into cultural and economic ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’. Instead his analysis clings to the conventions of what Timothy Brennan has called a ‘centre/periphery model’<sup>2</sup> of world literary space, promoting a perception of the Caribbean region as external to established systems for the production and appreciation of literary works, while portraying Walcott as a figure whose unusual talent might allow him to transcend the perceived limitations of his region and emerge as a new ‘centre’ on a world literary stage.

Birkerts’s characterisation of Derek Walcott as a ‘central’ poet from a ‘peripheral’ region provides a conceptual starting-point for this article, which considers how conventional perceptions of Walcott’s status as a public literary figure relate to the portrayal of economically marginalised communities and canonical literary traditions in his poetry. Comparing the rhetoric

surrounding Walcott's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1992 with the portrayal of ideas about 'centre' and 'periphery' in his widely acclaimed poem *Omeros* (1990), I suggest that the representation of marginalised subjects in Walcott's poetry sits uneasily alongside his own authorial self-portraits and pronouncements on literary prestige and regional positioning. Framed by critical debates around the validity of a 'centre/periphery model' in world literature, my analysis seeks to challenge the binary approach implied by setting 'centre' against 'periphery', offering a rigorous appraisal of the application of these terms in the specific context of Walcott's public commentaries and poetic works.

First published in 1990, *Omeros* was hailed as a 'masterpiece',<sup>3</sup> an accomplished tour-de-force which deploys the *terza rima* rhyme scheme famously used by Dante, with a plot loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. However, the poem also portrays a poet/Narrator who struggles to compose and convey his verse, preoccupied with the problem of capturing 'the right noun on a page'.<sup>4</sup> Writing in *Omeros* is a painful act of craftsmanship, requiring 'crouching care [...] crabbed, natural devotion' (227), and it involves a difficult 'filtration' of local subject-matter into an internationally distributed artwork. Sarah Brouillette has suggested that the author-figure in Walcott's earlier work *The Fortunate Traveller* is cast as a 'literary intermediary'<sup>5</sup> between deprived peoples and privileged readers. *Omeros*, however, depicts a significantly diminished confidence in the poet's capacity to act in this role. Caught between 'New' and 'Old' Worlds, between periphery and centre, the narrator-figure in *Omeros* repeatedly expresses anxiety at his attempt to compose an aesthetic representation of characters and experiences, preoccupied by his own position as a liminal and transitional figure who is neither central nor peripheral to his surroundings.

Walcott's sustained interrogation of the poet's representational instincts in *Omeros* is

explicitly related to the work's status as a product for international distribution, destined to be consumed by an audience based in a considerably more privileged social context. *Omeros* is a text poised to make its way in a world governed by the restrictions of literary and historical convention, where economic inequalities combine with geographic divisions to prompt a figurative opposition of 'centre' and 'periphery'. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova theorises such divisions, arguing that the global production and dissemination of literature can be defined in terms of regions with varying levels of 'power, prestige, and volume of linguistic and literary capital'.<sup>6</sup> Casanova's understanding of 'world literary space' involves a complex and highly structured international sphere dominated by an 'unequal trade' between 'central' and 'peripheral' literary regions. For Casanova, 'literary capital is inherently national', and recognition of literary prowess is accrued in a hereditary system of value whereby 'each writer enters into international competition armed (or unarmed) with his entire literary "past", a past determined 'by virtue solely of his membership in a linguistic area and a national grouping'.<sup>7</sup> Echoing Birkerts's conception of an individual's prodigious talent as requiring a redrawing of the circle of literary prestige, Casanova suggests that only those 'peripheral' writers who acknowledge a capacity for modernity and innovation as the domain of 'traditional' centres can themselves accede to become 'the only true moderns, the only ones fully to recognise and know the literature of the present'.<sup>8</sup> This argument retains a sense of clearly defined and divided realms which interact only in terms of assimilation rather than creative integration; for Casanova, the 'periphery' produces, while the 'centre' absorbs and validates.

In Casanova's discussion of established patterns of literary 'centres' and 'peripheries', the Nobel Prize in Literature plays a crucial role as a central arbitrator of 'literary prestige', and she deems it 'the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of art itself'.<sup>9</sup>

This ‘proof’ was awarded to Walcott less than two years after *Omeros* was published, when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. In many ways, Walcott’s accession to worldwide reputation consecrated by the Prize follows precisely the kind of trajectory from ‘periphery’ to universalised ‘centre’ theorised by Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*. The published versions of his Nobel Lecture and acceptance speeches reveal Walcott to be enthusiastic in acceptance and reiteration of the prestigious nature of the Prize, though he is most eager to praise the landscape and people of the Caribbean as an essential factor in his success.

Walcott’s public commentaries have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Caribbean region to his creative process, and his Nobel speeches are no exception. Describing the multitude of languages and cultural traditions co-existing in the region, he imagines ‘Antillean art’ as a ‘restoration of our shattered histories [...] our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent’.<sup>10</sup> Walcott’s rhetoric shifts from imagery of fragmentation to a sense of creative possibility, arising from what he describes as the ‘early morning’ of this region’s cultural development:

There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself [...] This is the benediction that is celebrated, a fresh language and a fresh people. I stand here in their name, if not their image—but also in the name of the dialect they exchange.<sup>11</sup>

The above quotation is representative of Walcott’s widely repeated affirmations of the Caribbean region as a space whose perceived lack of a rigid or written cultural history supports and enhances creativity. However, despite his valorisation of the Caribbean region’s provision of ‘a

fresh language and a fresh people'<sup>12</sup> the rhetoric of Walcott's speeches at the Nobel Ceremony liberally deploy the conventional vocabulary of 'benediction', 'honour' and 'pride' to position the prize as a powerful and prestigious award. Walcott's receipt of the Nobel Prize marked a point in the poet's career at which he was considered to be, and evidently felt himself, unequivocally invited into the 'centre' of a canonising literary establishment. In response, Walcott's acceptance speeches at the Prize Ceremony in Stockholm mark a zenith in his self-portrayal as, to repeat Birkerts's phrase, a 'poet from the periphery'. Casting the European ceremony in Stockholm as a form of recognition by a literary 'centre', Walcott's depiction of the Caribbean region repeatedly contrasts its attributes with the established centre from which he now speaks.

In his Nobel Lecture, Walcott describes the Caribbean region as both geographically and culturally distant from his immediate location as a Nobel Laureate newly placed at the very centre of a centralising literary power. He introduces the Caribbean as unfamiliar to his audience in Stockholm, presenting the region as a space whose 'fresh language' and 'fresh people' are inaccessible to a global audience who Walcott chastises for a 'touristic' view of the islands. Wholeheartedly accepting the perceived cache of receiving the prize, Walcott treats it as an event of global import. Just as Birkerts's comment suggests that the 'compass' should be 'centred' at Walcott's position, the poet uses his moment in the Nobel spotlight to reaffirm his placement at the figurative centre, not only of the prize-giving ceremony, but also as representative of the Caribbean region to a worldwide audience. Portraying himself as poetic spokesman for the Caribbean, Walcott insists on the region's important role as a factor in his personal success. This is expressed through figurative language, as when he conflates his own position at the centre of the Nobel proceedings with the landscape of sea and surf associated with the Caribbean. '[O]n

the raft of this dais', he announces halfway through the Lecture, 'there is the sound of the applauding surf: our landscape, our history recognized.'<sup>13</sup> Walcott's Banquet Speech reiterates his role as cultural representative, again emphasising the geographical and cultural distance of the Caribbean from this moment, while embodying certain aspects of the region in his own figure. Thus Walcott accepts the 'honour' paid him by the Nobel Committee in 'the one name' of the 'supposedly broken languages of the Caribbean region'.<sup>14</sup> The award of the prize is figured as 'a moment that recognises their endeavour'.<sup>15</sup> The Prize is therefore imagined as a point of coherence and cohesiveness which is attributed outwards to a distant region, in a moment whose validating power has been endowed by the 'central' establishment of the Nobel Committee.

Although he does not attempt to contest a notion of the Caribbean as a region considered 'peripheral' to the kind of literary establishment represented by the Nobel Committee in Stockholm, Walcott's determination to cast the Caribbean as a basis for his literary success implies that a literary 'compass' may only be 're-centred' at his position if this is accompanied by a corresponding shift in perspective regarding the entire region. Certainly Walcott is not the first Nobel Laureate to adopt the role of representative for an entire region or community, and the Prize has been used as a means of raising the profile of areas or regions whose economic restrictions frequently earn them a marginal role in models of global literary production. Recounting the history of the Nobel Prize, James English cites Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, who accepted the prize 'as an African', as exemplifying a long tradition of 'the position of laureate as a representative one'.<sup>16</sup> In English's view, the Nobel Committee have become increasingly attentive to 'writers of *world literature* who could nonetheless and simultaneously be identified with *local* roots or sites of production'.<sup>17</sup> He finds that 'these writers represented not just particular local (or diasporic) literary communities, but the highly selective emergence of

these communities, or certain of their aspects, into the global articulation of world literature'.<sup>18</sup>

In this construction, the symbolic role of the Nobel Prize is also an example of a literary power which incorporates peripheral elements – albeit through a ‘highly selective’ process – and thereby centralises them for global consumption. The Europe-based Nobel Committee chooses to reward the ‘peripheral’ author, and by doing so, attempts to seal that individual’s position as part of a prestigious world-renowned ‘circle’ of globally identifiable authors.

Casanova’s definition of the Prize as ‘the greatest proof of literary consecration’ ignores critiques by others who have questioned the Nobel Committee’s approach to ‘world’ literatures. For Casanova, the idea of the Nobel Prize as a consecrating force contributes to her view of ‘world literature’ as a system of intersecting circles, at whose centre she places European and American systems of publication. Yet the prize is not an uncomplicated means of asserting and establishing literary prestige. Just as English argues that the ‘emergence’ of literary communities into a field of ‘world literature’ is highly selective, Jewell notes that ‘from its beginning, the awarders of the prize – the literary committee in Stockholm – have been accused of cultural elitism’.<sup>19</sup> In Walcott’s case, there is a significant and troubling distance between the rhetoric associated with the poet’s public persona as Nobel Prize winner, and the views expressed within his earlier creative work. The broad brush-strokes of the rhetoric surrounding the Nobel Prize may threaten to overshadow or blur the content and ethical positioning of the work itself.

Timothy Brennan cites the example of Walcott’s accession to the Nobel Prize in Literature in order to question assumptions made about literature ‘from the periphery’ by representatives of a supposed literary ‘centre’. In Brennan’s view, the intricacies of a non-binary notion of periphery and marginality are frequently elided amidst what he sees as ‘the inadequacies of the discourse of globalisation’.<sup>20</sup> In the process of literary consecration as interpreted by Brennan, literature



which begins by attempting to explore or expose a ‘peripheral’ – that is to say, marginal or marginalised – viewpoint instead becomes embroiled in what he calls ‘a process of taming’.<sup>21</sup> Such taming means that cultural value involves, according to Brennan, ‘an ex post facto *framing* of [writers’] work by an apparatus of organic literary intellectuals’, and he argues that ‘the cosmopolitan script is largely written afterward, and then superimposed on work whose tempos and tortured uncertainties are subsequently blurred. Everything painful and slow and suspicious in them is converted to a set of moral maxims’.<sup>22</sup> For Brennan, this is an integral and unwarranted aspect to the process of achieving cultural recognition and status.

To illustrate the ‘conversion’ or ‘containment’ of ‘everything [...] slow and suspicious’ in literature, Brennan singles out Derek Walcott’s crowning as Nobel Laureate. He cites institutional descriptions of Walcott, particularly post-Nobel, as indicative of the process of ‘sublimation’ involved in ascribing ‘literary value in the metropolis’.<sup>23</sup> Quoting James Atlas’s judgement that in Derek Walcott ‘we can discern the history of what is most enduring in our tradition, invigorated, as it has always been, by the voice of our most recent immigrants’, Brennan uses such viewpoints to illustrate his claim that more contentious elements of Walcott’s poetry are effaced in the process of accepting him into an established literary circle. Through such Western or Eurocentric references to ‘our tradition’ and ‘our [...] immigrants’, Brennan finds that ‘divided sympathies and historical burdens’ are ‘simply ignored’ by validating literary powers.<sup>24</sup> This critique emphasises the difficulties of reliance on a ‘centre/periphery model’, offering a sharply observed demonstration of how straightforward binary division of ‘literary space’ can be both convenient and misleading. Brennan’s characterisation of established systems for ascribing cultural value as essentially constrictive – diminishing, rather than enhancing, the scope for interpretation of texts – offers a pertinent counterpoint to the ‘global model’ of world

literature posited by Pascale Casanova, which relies on the affirmation of precisely those assumptions which Brennan critiques.

Turning to *Omeros*, it is worth pausing to consider what form the ‘tortured uncertainties’ mentioned by Brennan take in Walcott’s writing. As Birkerts’s review indicates, Walcott’s work offers a fictional representation of authorship based in a region which theorists such as Casanova have deemed ‘peripheral’ to the production of literary texts. It also deliberately references themes, metaphors, forms and styles drawn from canonical Western traditions, recasting and transforming characters from Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* as inhabitants of the Caribbean island of St Lucia. The work’s impressive magnitude, along with its confident framing of Greek myth and deft deployment of the Dantean *terza rima* rhyme scheme, prompted many early critics to praise Walcott’s work as a ‘reinvigoration’ of the ‘epic’ form. Yet if this is epic, it is a conscious and deliberate departure from conventional subject-matter, focused upon the kinds of characters and events not traditionally associated with canonical epic. Walcott has tended to dissociate his poem from literary precursors associated with epic, arguing that *Omeros* is ‘not conceptually a massive thing’.<sup>25</sup> In particular, he distances the Homeric references in his own work from the example of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which he describes as a ‘massive parallel [...] in which everything in Homer is echoed by the Irish experience’.<sup>26</sup> After suggesting that *Ulysses* is ‘on a scale that no artist of today with any sensibility would attempt’,<sup>27</sup> Walcott goes on to consider how critical responses to *Omeros* repeatedly express ‘astonishment’ at its ambitious scope:

There was so much astonishment when the reviews came out – first of all that it should be so long, you know? [...] Then there was the idea of my undertaking something they call an epic, which I don’t call an epic; I call it a very intimate work. All of that was there, I think, in the

astonishment at the idea of something happening in a part of the world where it really should not have, that should really have come from another, perhaps more ‘developed’ place.<sup>28</sup>

Walcott’s rhetoric echoes that of his Nobel Lecture, particularly when he argues that the ‘freshness of the experience’ in this less ‘developed’ place encouraged his references to Homer and other writers.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in critical considerations of ‘epic’ elements in *Omeros*, the discourse of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ re-emerges in terms of development and region; thus for Robert Hamner in *Epic of the Dispossessed*, part of the power of *Omeros* lies in the fact that it ‘encompasses precisely those individuals who are traditionally peripheral in standard classics’.<sup>30</sup>

Walcott’s treatment of ‘traditionally peripheral’ individuals is filtered through the responses of a narrating author who repeatedly considers the risk that he may not fully express the subjects he draws from local island life. The narrator in *Omeros* fears that he may end up producing ‘postcard poems’, shallow and ill-conceived aestheticisations of the landscape and people around him. This self-critique is most clear in his reflections on the portrayal of the people and surroundings of St Lucia, which form the centrepiece of the poem. The relative poverty of the poet/Narrator’s subjects collides with awareness of his own privileged position, as a former inhabitant who has achieved relative wealth and prestige. This concern is figured partly through the deliberate and constant invocation of the ‘classics’ of a literary establishment. Steeped in the views and imagery of other cultures, the narrator fears that he is somehow detached from the island which he considers to be home. St Lucia has become ‘untranslatable’ (167), altered by distant journeys through ‘cities / that open like *The World’s Classics*’ (187). Later, the narrator fears that he might ‘prefer’ a landscape moderated by the ‘thickening syntax’ of ‘colonial travellers, the measured prose I read / as a schoolboy’ (227).

This difficulty of distance enforced by an altered cultural perspective is complicated by the fact that Walcott is himself a St Lucian who has ‘crossed the perimeter’ of the Atlantic as a direct result of his literary celebrity. The complex cultural self-positioning evident in Walcott’s Nobel speeches is therefore a more problematic factor in *Omeros*, where the partial basis for the poem’s anticipated international success is also the crux of the author’s sense of personal and cultural dislocation. In terms of both physical location and economic wealth, the version of Walcott we encounter as poet/Narrator of *Omeros* has become largely removed from the region which continues to form the basis for his creative literary work. He has been ‘assimilated’, in Casanova’s terms, by a literary ‘centre’ located elsewhere, partly through influence by Western literary traditions, and partly, in practical terms, through long stints of time spent in America and Europe. In its own self-portrait, therefore, Walcott’s work acknowledges the possibility that it might contribute to what Graham Huggan has defined as a kind of literary tourism, where ‘touristic discourse works to promote difference while simultaneously erasing it’.<sup>31</sup> In his Nobel Lecture, Walcott accuses others of a ‘touristic’ view of the Caribbean region, implying that the privilege of truly understanding this less ‘developed’ place adheres to himself as a representative figure. In *Omeros*, however, unresolved anxieties expressed by the poet/Narrator anticipate Huggan’s notion of a ‘postcolonial exotic’, where the ‘Commonwealth writer’ is ‘celebrated as an *exotic* [...] required to play the dual role of cultural ambassador and native informant’.<sup>32</sup> The narrator of *Omeros* is simultaneously resistant to the idea of taking on the role of ‘native informant’, and fearful that he may not be equipped to even consider it.

Though Walcott, as we have seen, accedes to a role of ‘cultural ambassador’ in his Nobel speeches, *Omeros* reveals a narrator who is reluctant in this respect, constantly interrogating his own motivations and responses. In her analysis of what she terms the ‘third-world subject’ as

‘literary coinage’, Sarah Brouillette follows Huggan in treating Walcott’s earlier work *The Fortunate Traveller* as an exploration of the aestheticised commercialisation of peripheral or marginalised individuals. Brouillette describes Walcott’s approach as that of an ‘insider-outsider’, who ‘considering his metropolitan readers [...] will depict himself as a reluctant native guide, suspicious of the tourist-reader’s exoticising tendencies’.<sup>33</sup> For Brouillette, the author-figure’s portrayal as ‘a literary intermediary between his Third World subjects and the privileged audience that reads about their plight’<sup>34</sup> is a key factor in the depiction of authorial personae in the work of Walcott and others. She argues that this stance arises from the author’s self-conscious foregrounding of the ‘simultaneity of his insider-outsider positioning’,<sup>35</sup> which strongly recalls Huggan’s notion of the ‘dual role’ of the writer expected to act as intermediary between cultures. The notions of ‘literary intermediary’, ‘cultural ambassador’, ‘informant’ all point to an idea of the author as a boundary-crossing figure, who forms a fictional bridge between an imagined ‘central’, ‘metropolitan’ audience and its obverse – the described ‘periphery’ or ‘margins’, which in these accounts appear knowable only through the intervention of such author-figures. Brouillette’s interpretation of Walcott’s self-depiction ‘as a reluctant native guide’<sup>36</sup> expands into a discussion of the ‘economics’ of his poetic description of such a stance, in which the poet ‘admits and diagnoses a tendency to engage in the tourist-voyeur’s transformation of poverty into a romantic condition producing authentic folk culture’.<sup>37</sup> Taking her cue from a line in *The Fortunate Traveller* which refers to ‘debt’, Brouillette elaborates her observation to discuss the ‘transformation of poverty’ as a brand of ‘literary coinage’, whereby individuals become ‘a real currency as their stories are sold to a marketplace that traffics in an aesthetics of suffering’.<sup>38</sup>

Brouillette’s reading is convincing in the context of the confident tone of the narrator in *The*

*Fortunate Traveller*. In *Omeros*, on the other hand, it is precisely such an ‘aesthetics of suffering’ that the narrator figure apparently endeavours to resist. Instead he worries that his ‘cosmopolitan’ experience – as a poet whose international reputation and habit of worldwide travel means that he is firmly ensconced as the ‘fortunate traveller’ of the earlier work – might forestall his right to act as an archetypal ‘literary intermediary’, to accurately translate his subjects into meaningful and appropriate descriptions. By contrast with the *Fortunate Traveller*, *Omeros* repeatedly expresses awareness of the difficult and perhaps unconvincing nature of this author’s self-assigned role as intermediary and representative of a supposedly ‘peripheral’ literary and cultural space. Throughout *Omeros*, the poet/Narrator worries that he may himself be subject to a touristic impulse, self-questioning ‘hadn’t I made their poverty my paradise?’ (p. 229).

The narrator’s anxiety is entirely bound up with the representation of his efforts to produce a manuscript, and is prompted by the awareness, even expectation, that his poem will inevitably travel beyond the realm it describes, becoming a global ‘commodity’ whose ascribed value benefits its author while remaining ‘unknown and unread’<sup>39</sup> by the figures it contains. As an established author, already consecrated on an international stage, Walcott is able to sidestep the practical problem of peripheral obscurity highlighted by Casanova, only to dramatise the difficulties of navigating forms of representation once given access to the prestige of this ‘world literary space’. *Omeros* reiterates the ramifications of this assumed positioning of the author-figure as ‘ambassador’ or ‘informant’ between cultures, with the poet-figure cast (and self-casting) as representative of ‘marginal’ voices while simultaneously expected to become involved in the metropolitan whirl of literary production, acceding to established ‘metropolitan’ discourses. This is a concern which resurfaces in Walcott’s Nobel Lecture, when he concludes by

expressing a ‘fear of selfishness [...] here on this podium with the world paying attention not to them but to me’.<sup>40</sup>

The poet’s doubts about his role as ambassador or intermediary between an impoverished ‘periphery’ and a literary ‘centre’ are reaffirmed in *Omeros* even as he relishes the prospect of his book’s publication. The poet/Narrator visualises his work in its eventual published form, which is that of a conventionally produced canonical text: traditionally printed and bound, complete with neat rows of text, thick cream pages and stitched seams. Yet this anticipation of a bound book is intermixed with imagery of transmuted transatlantic boundaries: the covers of the book are likened to ‘the interlocking / basins of a globe in which one half fits the next // into an equator’ (319). The metaphor shifts seamlessly from the object of his own text to another manufactured object, the representational globe. The image is then realigned to iterate its relevance to his central concerns, when he figuratively redraws the globe’s line as being simultaneously a connection and a point of disjunction:

Its meridian

was not North and South but East and West. One, the New  
World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain.

(319)

In the construction of this trope, Walcott aligns the habitual Western pattern of reading (left to right, top to bottom) with the geographical zones of the map: having cast his book as a globe, he redefines that globe as a metaphorical book, waiting to be ‘read’. The metaphor of the book works as a unifying device, which aims to capture *both* sides of a geographical and cultural space between the binding covers of the text. Yet at other points in the poem, this vision of the book as

a complete object, an enfolding textual space, is problematised in terms of both its context and its intentions.

The final stanzas in the penultimate chapter of *Omeros* emphasise the limitations of the book as a transnational object. The cosmopolitan Atlantic traversals made by the figure of the poet/Narrator are thrown into stark perspective by a closing reminder that ‘quiet Achille’, one of the central characters in the part of the narrative set on St Lucia, will cross no physical, geographical or cultural perimeters. Although he has crossed the Atlantic in an extended dream-sequence, Achille, the narrator muses, ‘had no passport, since the horizon needs none’ (320). This tension between the unlimited (natural) oceanic horizon and the artificial lines drawn upon it by the map of civilisation forms part of a larger metaphorical set which governs the portrayal of text and the act of writing within *Omeros*. The poem is self-reflexive, continually interrogating its creator’s representational instincts. These instincts are explicitly related to the poem’s position as a text making its way in a world governed by both literary and historical conventions: the demands of a distant but all-pervasive canon – the ‘world republic of letters’ which awaits the poem’s publication. The imagery of map and book as interlinked and unifying symbols, connecting Old World and New World in the image of a single globe, refutes a contrast between centre and periphery in favour of a model of equal and corresponding zones. Instead of a radiating circle which excludes or demotes everything outside itself, Walcott offers us ‘halves of one brain’ (319). The image expresses a version of universality, though it still retains the possibility of a chronological inequality, depending on the reading: the New World is ambiguously made ‘exactly like the Old’ (*Ibid.*). Whether this implies that the New World is constructed in careful imitation, or with perfect equality, is left to the reader to decide.

Walcott’s imagery of globes and mapping in his portrayal of cultural spaces in *Omeros*



anticipates the trope of the map which has since become popular in considerations of world literary models. Speaking at a conference in response to Casanova's portrayal of an unequal trade between 'centre' and 'periphery' in literary production, Jerome McGann countered the notion of a 'Western Eyes Only' perspective by positing the possibility of a 'truly globalised world'.<sup>41</sup> For McGann, the notion of a powerful centre and subservient periphery is a reductive way of characterising spheres of literary production. Against Casanova's argument that 'there is a kind of universality that escapes the centers',<sup>42</sup> he echoes Brennan in suggesting that we might 'call into question this way of mapping the world's cultural territories':

What if we decide that the center/periphery map has been drawn Under Western Eyes Only and that it gives poor service in a truly globalized world? [...] [W]e here should be wary of imagining 'deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world'.<sup>43</sup>

McGann's comment draws attention to the danger of 'imagining' authorial positions. Yet the statement is complicated by the difficulty of defining or construing a 'truly globalized world'.

While Casanova appears to detect no Eurocentric complexity in expressing her own hope that the *World Republic of Letters* may provide a 'critical weapon' for 'deprived and dominated writers',<sup>44</sup> McGann elides the difficulty of establishing what a globalised world might look like. Walcott's representations of local subjects and a world-traversing cosmopolitan narrator ultimately offer a rebuke to the notion of 'centre' as a construct opposed or superior to 'periphery'. In its metaphorical constructions of map, globe and characters whose devotion to their locale supersedes any concern with others' construction of them, *Omeros* proposes a version of global cultures in which the many permutations of centre and periphery have become

inextricable, to the point of invalidation.

In the penultimate chapter of *Omeros*, Walcott's poet/Narrator is shown to finally face the complexities of his own attitude to the people and landscape which he transforms to verse. In Chapter LVIII, which flaunts its references to Dante with grandiose panache, the bard-like character 'Omeros' emerges as a Dantean Virgil-figure, who leads the poet/Narrator up to the 'foul sulphur of hell in paradise' (289) of the Soufrière volcano. Throughout the text, 'Omeros' appears as an alternative to the smoothly cosmopolitan Narrator; he is, by turns, a beggar 'clutching in one scrofulous // claw his brown paper manuscript', a classical statue, and an ancient bardic voice 'heard [...] in that sea' (283). It is in the guise of a local bard figure, 'Seven Seas', that this alternative-Narrator commands the poet to reevaluate his travels and his writing:

[T]his is what this island has meant to you,  
why my bust spoke, why the sea-swift was sent to you:  
to circle yourself and your island with this art.

(283)

The aesthetic process suggested in a command to 'circle' the island with his 'art' is tremendously significant to Walcott's project in *Omeros*. The island of St Lucia does not emerge as a periphery, but rather as a crucial emotional and cultural centre, for the poet/Narrator as well as the characters he portrays.

To conclude, I would like to return to the moment of the Nobel Prize. As I have shown, Walcott's determination to cast his receipt of the Prize as a symbolic recognition of the creative potential of the Caribbean region, and to portray himself as cultural ambassador for the region, contrasts with the subtlety of his representation of the complex role of 'literary intermediary' in

*Omeros*. However, Walcott's dedication to the notion of the poet as representative of a marginalised periphery is no fleeting response. It is reiterated in a later anecdote, this time regarding the nomination of the novelist V.S. Naipaul for the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature. Caryl Phillips describes Walcott's speculation at the prospect of Naipaul winning the Prize: 'It's bigger than him', Walcott suggested, 'It will mean something for the region'.<sup>45</sup> At the news that the novelist had indeed received the prize, Phillips reports that Walcott 'seemed overjoyed':

'Short of giving it to me again, it's the best thing they could have done.' He laughed then fell silent again. 'You know,' he said. 'How do you think Vidia will react? Do you think he will see it as anything that goes beyond himself? As a Caribbean prize?'<sup>46</sup>

Walcott's speculation recalls his own eagerness to acknowledge the region of his birth and suggests his anticipation that others may share this approach. It also indulges, like his Nobel speeches, in an implicit sense of the individual poet as the centre of a radiating circle of influence, a figurehead who can become representative of a nation or region – the very process which *Omeros* questions.

Naipaul refused to cast the award as a 'Caribbean prize', thanking India and Britain but not mentioning Trinidad. The difference in view between Naipaul and Walcott arises from their contrasting impressions of what it means to attempt publication in a region considered external to established domains of literary production. Musing on Naipaul's elision of the Caribbean in his Nobel acceptance speeches, Phillips acknowledges that it was the 'literary culture' of Britain which 'allowed him to become a writer'.<sup>47</sup> Phillips's statement expresses a view stated in more emphatic terms by Naipaul himself. In *A Writer's People*, Naipaul emphasises the difficulty of

attaining literary status – or even achieving economic survival – as an author based in the Caribbean. Complaining of a lack of ‘human wealth in the islands’,<sup>48</sup> Naipaul’s article positions Walcott’s own early work amongst ‘talk about a local culture, the steel bands and the dance’,<sup>49</sup> which Naipaul dismisses as mere cultural totems. He extends this jibe into a suggestion that the poet was ‘rescued’ by employment at ‘the American universities’, arguing that the Caribbean ‘cramped and quickly exhausted a talent which in a larger and more varied space might have spread its wings and done unsuspected things’.<sup>50</sup>

For Naipaul, the Caribbean represents the direct opposite of Walcott’s radiant conception of freshness and space for cultural development. Whereas Walcott speaks worshipfully of his region as the prompt for his creativity, Naipaul is emphatic that it was necessary for him to escape the perceived constrictions of the region in order to become a successfully published author. In both constructions, the role of an international reputation emerges as a means of overcoming a perceived location at the ‘periphery’ of literary production. The difficulties of publication and accession to literary prestige within the locale of the Caribbean echo the practical limitations on literary publication theorised by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*. However I suggest that the final judgement on the relevance of a ‘centre/periphery map’ should go to *Omeros*. With its representation of global and historical themes rooted in a Caribbean locale, Walcott’s poem illustrates the paradoxes and subtleties involved in representing a marginalised culture in poetic form, meaning that the poem ultimately represents a careful rebuke to, and challenge of, the presumed ‘centre’ of Birkerts’s imagined literary ‘circle’.

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Birkerts, ‘Heir apparent’, *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, compiled and edited

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by Robert D. Hamner (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1993), p. 335.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 246.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 266. Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the main body of the article.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Pascale Casanova, *Le république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), translated as *The World Republic of Letters* by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Nobel Lecture: The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory',  
<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html)>  
[accessed 18 September 2014].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Banquet Speech',

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<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-speech.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-speech.html)>

[accessed 18 September 2014].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 303.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; original emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Jewell, 'The Nobel Prize: History and Canonicity', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33.1 (2000), 97-113, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Brennan, *At Home*, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; original emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> Derek Walcott, 'Reflections on *Omeros*', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96.2 (1997), 229-246, p. 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 336.

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<sup>31</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 203.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.; original emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers*, p. 26

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>40</sup> Walcott, 'The Antilles'.

<sup>41</sup> Jerome McGann, 'Pseudodoxia Academica', *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008), 645-656 (pp. 651, 655).

<sup>42</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic*, p. 354.

<sup>43</sup> McGann, 'Pseudodoxia', pp. 651, 655.

<sup>44</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic*, p. 345.

<sup>45</sup> Caryl Phillips, 'Reluctant Hero', *The Guardian*, 12 October 2001,

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/12/fiction.vشناipaul>> [accessed 17 September 2014].

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling: An Essay in Five Parts* (New

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York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.